

THE Princess Virginia

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Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "Rose-
mary in Search of a Father," Etc.

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"This is the best of good fortune!" exclaimed Count von Bretzelstein. "Egot told me you were here, and without waiting to get the note he said you had left for me I came to you straight from the railway station."

"Splendid! And now you must dine with me. It was that I asked of you in my note. Dinner early, a serious talk and an audience for solemnity in a visit to the Leopoldhalle to see Mile Felice from the Folies Bergere do her famous fire and fountain dance. A box, curtains half drawn, no one need know that the chancellor helps his young friend amuse himself."

"I thank your royal highness for the honor you suggest, and nothing could give me greater pleasure if I had not a suggestion to venture, in place of yours, which I believe may suit you better. I think I know of what you wish to talk with me, and I desire the same, while the business I have most at heart."

"Ah, your business is my business, then?"

"I hope you may so consider it. In any case it is business which must be carried through now or never and is of life and death importance to those whom it concerns. How it is to be done or whether done at all may depend on you, if you consent to interest yourself, and it could not be in more competent hands. I'd been given my choice of an assistant out of the whole world I should have chosen your royal highness."

"This sounds like an adventure."

"It may be an adventure and at the same time an act of justice."

"Good. Although it was not in search of an adventure that I came to you, any more than it was the hope of doing which brought me on a sudden impulse to my little hunting lodge, still I trust I have always the instinct of a sportsman."

"I am sure of that, and I have the less hesitation in enlisting your good will because it happens that your lord and mine can be killed with one shot."

"Chancellor, you excite my curiosity."

The old man smiled gently, but under the bristling brows glowed a flame of the last embers in a dying fire. "Upstairs," said he, "is a pretty woman, a beauty. She claims the name of Helen Mowbray. Though her right to it is more than disputable. Her love at first threatens a public scandal."

"An, you are not the first one who has spoken of this pretty lady since I crossed the frontier this morning," exclaimed the young man, pressing. He pushed and lit his pipe before going on as if he wished to think or restrain his control, but at last he looked out at the young man, smiling. "So the lady must talk about for the moment in all Rhætia is under the same roof with me."

"Fortunately, she is close at hand," said the chancellor. "Do you mean that in speaking of our great girl? This girl has drawn the emperor into a fit of morose gloom. It is no more a secret than that, and were she out of the way he would wake us from a dream. But this is the moment of the crisis. He must be sixed now or he is lost forever and all our hopes with him. Blessed would be the man who brought my poor master to his senses. I have tried and failed. But you could do it."

"I?"

"The sword of justice is ready for your hand."

"That sentence has a solemn ring. I don't see what you want me to do. But what sort of woman is this who has bewitched your grave Leopold?"

"Beautiful and clever as women are clever, but not clever enough to fight her battle out against you and me."

The prince laughed again. "It isn't my métier to fight with women. I prefer to make love to them."

"Ah, you have said it! That is what I beg your royal highness to do."

"How am I to get at her when Leopold stands guard?"

"He will not be on guard for some hours."

"Ha, ha! You mean me to understand that there's no time to waste."

"Not a moment."

"What is the girl like?"

"Tall and slender, pink and white as a flower, dark lashed and yellow haired, like an Austrian beauty; eyes gray or violet. It would be hard to say which for a man of my years, but even I can assure you that when the lady looks down, then suddenly up again under those dark lashes, it's something to quicken the pulse of any man under sixty."

"It would quicken mine only to heat

your description if you hadn't just put a maggot in my head that tickles me to laughter instead of raptures," said the prince. "Tell me this—has this girl a tiny black mole just over the left eyebrow, very fetching, and when she smiles does her mouth point upward a bit on the right side, like a fairy signpost showing the way to a small round scar almost as good as a dimple?"

The chancellor reflected for a few seconds and then replied that unless his eyesight and his memory had deceived him both these marks were to be met with on Miss Mowbray's face. He did not add that he had seen her but once and at the time had not taken interest enough to note details, for it was plain that the prince had a theory as to the lady's real identity and to establish it as a fact might be valuable.

"Is it possible that you've already met this dangerous young person?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, I begin to believe it may be so. I'll explain why later. Thereby hangs a confession. At all events, a certain lady exactly answering the description you've given is very likely in this neighborhood. I've heard that she was shortly due in Kronburg, and it was in my mind when desisting and going to spend a few days in the woods for the sake of seeing you that I might see her also before I went home again. As a matter of fact, the lady and I have had a misunderstanding at a rather unfortunate moment, so I'd just imprudently taken her into my confidence concerning—er—some family affairs. If it is she who is misapprehending in Rhætia as Miss Mowbray and turning your emperor's head, it may be that she's trying to revenge herself on me. She's pretty enough to beguile St. Anthony, let alone a St. Leopold, and she's clever enough to have thought out such a scheme. Our small quarrel happened about four weeks ago, and I've lost sight of the lady since. She disappeared, expecting probably to be followed, but she wasn't. The only question is, if she's playing Miss Mowbray, where did she get the mother's I've heard there is a Mowbray mother?"

"There's a faded Dresden china shepherdess that answers to the name," said the chancellor. "But these minutely accurate are easily manufactured."

The prince was amazed. "No, she wouldn't stick at a mother if she wanted one," he chuckled. "And, what she was about it, she has apparently amnesia a whole family tree. The black mole and the scar dimple—you're sure of them, chancellor? Because, if you are—"

"Oh, I am practically certain."

"Then the more pieces in the puzzle which I fit together the more likely does it seem that your Leopold's Miss Helen Mowbray and my Miss Jenny Bretz are one and the same."

"Miss Jenny Bretz?"

"Did you never hear the name?"

"If I have I've forgotten it."

"Chancellor, you wouldn't forget if you were a few years younger. Jenny Bretz is the prettiest if not the most talented singer ever sent out from Australia, the fashionable home of the Court theater of Kronburg in a fortnight, her first engagement in Rhætia."

"You are right. It may well be that she's been having a game with me a game that we can prevent now, thank heaven, from ending in earnest."

"Oh, yes; we can prevent that."

"Your royal highness met the lady in your own country?"

"No. It was in Paris at first, but I'm afraid I induced her to accept an engagement at home. We were great friends for a while, and really she's a charming creature. I can't blame myself. Who would have guessed that she'd turn out so ambitious? By Jove, I can sympathize with Leopold. The girl tried to twist me round her finger and I verily believe, fancied at one time that I would offer her marriage."

"It must be the same girl. And the emperor has offered her marriage?"

"What? Impossible! But—with the left hand, of course, though even that would be unheard of for a man in his—"

"I swear to your royal highness that if he isn't stopped he will force her on the Rhætian people as empress."

"God—little Jenny Bretz! I didn't half appreciate her brilliant qualities!"

"Yet I would wager that she appreciated yours."

The prince shrugged his shoulders. "I believe she really cared something for me—a month ago."

"Then she still cares. You are not a man whom a woman can forget, though pique or ambition may lead her to try.

I tell you frankly I believe that Providence sent your royal highness here at this moment, and my best hopes are now pinned on you. You and no one as well as you can save the emperor for a nobler fate. Even when I supposed you a stranger to this lady who calls herself Helen Mowbray I thought that if you would consent to meet her and exercise your fascinations there might be hope of averting the danger from my master. Now I hope everything. I beg, I entreat, that your royal highness will send up your name and ask the lady to see you without delay. She will certainly receive you, and when the emperor learns that she has done so it may go far to disillusion him, for, pardon me, your royal highness has a great reputation as a lady killer. Still more valuable would be, however—indeed, he would be cured of his infatuation forever—if—"

"If what?" inquired the young man, tired of the chancellor's long windedness and beating about the bush.

"If you could persuade her to go out to your hunting lodge. Then Leopold and Rhætia would be saved by you. What could be better? What could be more suitable?"

"What, indeed," echoed the prince. "For every one concerned except for Jenny Bretz?"

"Considering the havoc she has worked among us all, need she be considered before the interests of a great country and, perhaps I may add, an innocent and lovely royal lady, whom this girl is losing her best to humiliate?"

"I'm hanged if she need be so considered! Anyhow I'll do what I can. I'll send up my card, and then we'll see what happens."

The prince took from his pocket a small gold case sparkling with jewels, a gift which advertised itself as the gift of a woman. Out of the case a card, with a crown over the name in the fashion of his country, came sailing. An enquiry waiting to be answered joined him, passed on to a hand servant, and then for five minutes, ten minutes, the old man and the young one waited, talking of a subject very near to both their hearts.

At last, when they had no more to say, word came that Lady Mowbray and Miss Mowbray would see his royal highness.

"The value of a well regulated mother," laughed the young man, who had not troubled to inquire for Miss Mowbray. "Well, whatever comes of this interview, chancellor, I shall certainly have something to tell you."

"The suspense will be hard to bear," said Count von Bretzelstein. "But I have perfect faith in you. We understand each other completely now, and I'm growing old, and the past few days have tried me sorely. Remember, I press you all that's at stake and do not hesitate for an instant. Have as false a trifle with such a person as this. The emperor's own affairs are Rhætia. Hell has been made in trying to find the girl, and she's been in a

sworn to give his life to hear an answer in the way he wished.

Three-quarters of an hour had gone at last, and still the chancellor paced the purple drawing room, and still the prince did not come back to tell the news.

Had the young man failed? Had that siren upstairs beguiled him, as she had beguiled one stronger and greater than he? Was it possible that she had lured the whole secret of their scheme from the prince and then induced him to leave the hotel while her arch enemy funned in the salon, awaiting his return?

But, no; there were quick footsteps outside the door. The handle was turned. At least his royal highness was not a traitor.

As the chancellor had confessed, he was growing old. He felt suddenly very weak. His lips fell apart, trembling, yet he would not utter the words that hung upon them.

Fortunately the prince read the appeal in the glittering eyes and did not wait to be questioned.

"Well, I've seen the lady and had a talk with her," he said in a voice which was, the old man felt, somehow different in tone from what it had been an hour ago.

"And is she the person you have known?"

"Yes, she's a person I have known. It's all right about that plan of yours, chancellor. She's going with me to the lodge."

"Heaven be praised! It seems as most too good to be true. When does she go?"

"At once—that is, as soon as she can get ready. She will dine with me and my servants will stop behind and eat the dinner I had ordered here."

"Magnificent! They shall go with you alone? Nothing could be better. The presence of the emperor's mother's chambermaid would be a drawback."

"Oh, no chambermaid is needed for us two. The old mother remains at the hotel with a lady companion they have, who is fit. It was, or was, rather difficult to arrange this matter, but I don't think the plot I have in mind now will fail, provided you carry through your part as smartly as I have carried mine."

"You may depend upon me. Your royal highness is marvelous. Am I to understand that the lady goes with you quite of her own free will?"

"Quite. I flatter myself that she's rather pleased with the invitation. In a few minutes I and the late chambermaid will be spinning away for a drive in my old motor, you know, the one which I always leave at the lodge, to be ready for me whenever I choose to buy a flying start. I shall keep her until it's dark to give you plenty of time, but before starting I'll telephone to my staff that after all I shall be away and he must prepare dinner for me."

"I also will send a telephone message," said the chancellor.

"To Leopold?"

"Yes, your royal highness. Tell him there is no more to be said, and he will come to me, and even if he should not be intended to come to Kronburg tonight, this will bring him."

"You are sure you know where to catch the emperor?"

"Oh? He'll come now from Fulda, when he has heard there is something more than he will, and I must be in my room to receive and receive his message. It will soon be true now."

"Very well, all that seems to arrange itself admirably," said the prince. "Our motor drive can be started out for its hour and a half. The lady will then need to dress. Dinner can be kept back till half past 8, if it would suit your book to finish in more than the time. My dining room isn't very grand, but it has plenty of light and color and wouldn't make a bad background for the last act of this drama. What do you say, chancellor? I've always thought that your success as a stage manager of the theater of nations was partially due to your skill for dramatic effects."

"Such effects are not to be despised, considering the audience we cater to in that theater."

"Well, I promise you that for my little amateur prize tonight in my private theater the footlights shall be in the shade and two of the prince's puppets dressed and painted for the show before 8. I suppose you can be broken the leading man by that time or a little later?"

The bristling brows drew together involuntarily. Count von Bretzelstein was working without scruple against the emperor for the emperor's good, yet he winced at his own villain's light jest, and it was by an effort that he kept a note of disapproval out of his voice.

"Unless I much mistake his majesty will order a special train as soon as he has had my message," said he. "That and everything else falling as I can confidently expect, I shall be able to bring him out to your royal highness' hunting lodge a little after 8."

"You'll find us at the third course," proclaimed the prince.

"Naturally the emperor's appearance will startle your visitor," went on the chancellor, keenly watching the young man's extraordinarily handsome face.

"She would not dare take the risk and drive out with you, great as the temptation would no doubt be, did she dream that he would learn of the escapade and follow. Indeed, your royal highness must have found subtle weapons ready to your hand that you so soon broke through the armor of her prudence. I expected much from your magnetism and resourceful wit, yet I hardly dared hope for such speedy, such unqualified success as this which now seems assured to us."

"My weapons were sharpened on my past acquaintance with the pretty lady," explained the prince; "otherwise the result might have been postponed for as many days as I have delayed moments, though at last the end might have been the same."

"Not for Rhætia. Every instant counts. Thanks to you, we shall win, for, actress as this girl is, she'll find it a task beyond her powers to justify to a jealous man this evening's taste with you."

"If she tests those powers in our presence, we can be audience and admire her histrionic talents," said the prince pleasantly, though with some faint growing sign of constraint or perhaps impatience. "There's no doubt in my mind, whatever may be the lady's conception of her part, about the final tableau. And, after all, it's with that alone you concern yourself, eh, chancellor?"

"It's that alone," echoed the old man. "Then you would like to see and watch the business. There's nothing more for us to arrange. All right, chancellor, till do."

"What the curtain for the lady's act will play?"

The prince held out his hand, and Count von Bretzelstein grasped it and then he turned to his electric carriage, which had been waiting outside the door. A few minutes later he was driving away the way to the station in the railway station at Fulda.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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